

Correspondence on Zimbabwe

21 January 2004

Below we post a letter on Zimbabwe from a reader and a reply by Chris Talbot for the WSWs editorial board.

Re: “Zimbabwe on the brink of collapse,” by Chris Talbot, published on January 3, 2004.

Whilst welcoming the article it is not clear to me why “the west” is so hostile to Zimbabwe if it is not the intolerable presumption of land reform. The tidal wave of anti-Zimbabwe propaganda in the UK could never be due to Mugabe’s human rights record as the UK’s media claims.

Surely Zimbabwe is yet another instance of what Noam Chomsky calls “the threat of a good example,” and is therefore ruthlessly annihilated by the US; as has happened many times before. This is not the same as saying everything Zimbabwean is exemplary.

Yours sincerely,

LT

Dear Mr. T,

You are correct that the British media’s obsession with attacking Mugabe could not be due to his human rights record. The gross hypocrisy involved in singling out Zimbabwe whilst ignoring Nigeria, Pakistan and indeed Britain’s own abysmal record on human rights was noted in our article on the Commonwealth conference.

As I understand it, the point being made by Chomsky is that the Western powers punish underdeveloped countries when they carry out social reforms and threaten the interests of big business in any way. This is undoubtedly true, but to understand the British media hype it is necessary to be clear about the differences between the present situation in Zimbabwe and what was happening two or three decades ago.

Chomsky is describing land reform, welfare programmes and the taking over of foreign-owned companies in the period after the Second World War. Whilst such measures were usually quite limited, they did result in some benefit to the population of poor

countries. These concessions, and the granting of political independence to the countries of Africa, were made when the Soviet Union was still in existence. African politicians, and bourgeois nationalist leaders generally, could lean to some extent on Russia or even (as in Mugabe’s case) on China, to give them room to manoeuvre. That is not to deny the development of imperialist wars against regimes that the Western powers deemed to be a threat—from Vietnam onwards—but the Western powers did nevertheless allow the bourgeoisie in the former colonial countries some leeway. This was also in a period when the world economy was expanding, which is not the case today.

With the collapse of the USSR the agenda of left-wing nationalism is finished also. I tried to explain in my article the nature of Mugabe’s land programme, and it is hardly possible to bracket it with the reforms carried out in underdeveloped countries in an earlier period. The majority of the population are living in desperate poverty and facing starvation, and even the few who have gained any land have no means to develop it. My point was that the politics of bourgeois nationalism have reached a complete impasse and that Mugabe and the ZANU-PF elite must be held responsible for the disaster that faces the Zimbabwean people.

This brings us back to Britain and the Western powers who are clearly also responsible for what is happening. They certainly want to “punish” Zimbabwe, refusing financial support and allowing its people to starve.

Behind the hypocritical evocation of human rights, what is the British ruling elite concerned about? After all it is only just over two decades ago, threatened by a liberation war against the white racist regime, they welcomed Mugabe taking office as the only possible way of keeping Zimbabwe safe for capitalism. They gave grants to help Zimbabwe expand its education system and encouraged foreign investment and loans.

Mugabe kept his side of the bargain, leaving the white farmers and businessmen to make their profits, and implemented International Monetary Fund and World Bank directives despite making the occasional “socialist” speech.

As the economy fell into decline in the 1990s, Mugabe, as directed by the IMF, began to privatise the state sector and sacked thousands of civil servants. With a growing strike movement on his hands he presumably thought the IMF would give him some leeway. But they refused, and even demanded he withdrew his troops from the Congo where they were involved in lucrative mining and timber-looting operations.

Mugabe then organised gangs to move on the white farms. There was never any organised plan for land reform, but Mugabe clearly hoped it would improve his election prospects if some land was given to poor farmers and landless poor. Above all, he thought it would raise the stakes in his negotiations with the IMF, showing he could make trouble unless they granted concessions. This is where he completely miscalculated.

Though Mugabe was only taking over a few farms belonging mainly to supporters of the white racist regime of the civil war period—farmers who Britain had at one time agreed to compensate if they gave their land back to its rightful owners—it produced uniform condemnation throughout the British media. Massive publicity was given to “kith and kin” being murdered and raped, Mugabe was increasingly demonised and his removal from power demanded.

Despite the fact that these measures were hardly comparable with the seizure of multinational companies by former colonial governments in the 1960s—and that Mugabe has never taken over a single foreign-owned company—there was no longer any talk of accommodation with his regime. If Britain, overextended militarily by its support for US imperialism, could not organise an invasion, then the opposition Movement for Democratic Change should be given every support and the government of South Africa told to stop its “softly-softly” approach and work for regime change.

The reason for this response is twofold. First, Britain and all the Western countries are committed to IMF free market policies. Central to their perspective for the

continuation of the profit system is the impoverishment of the underdeveloped world, the control of its resources and mineral wealth, and the possibility of unfettered exploitation of its cheap labour. No government or leader—even the elder statesman Mugabe whom they once patronised—can be seen to be a hindrance to this process.

Second, Britain and the West are terrified of the growth of a movement against private property and social injustice, especially on a continent where free market measures have been so disastrous. Even the World Bank has been forced to admit that its programmes have produced nothing but more poverty and social misery. Mugabe has no intention of organising such a movement and in Zimbabwe he is widely hated for his tyrannical regime. But the idea of seizing land and even multinational companies by the poor black majority has had some resonance throughout Africa, and must be firmly rejected by the former colonial power.

Sincerely,
Chris Talbot



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